



FOOD DETECTIVE BY DAVID HAMMOND

Street eating lets country be known

“This is Marrakesh!” exclaimed Youseff Kalfaoui, who’d taken us to a flashy disco-like restaurant in this ancient Moroccan city of kings. Around us, servers slinked by in tight black dresses offering the same cocktails you’d find at Streeterville clubs.

Kalfaoui, our guide from Access Trips, was showing us a good time. He was clearly proud of this sleek establishment in his hometown. As it was, I found the whole experience rather similar to nights I’d spent in my own hometown of Chicago.

Not that there’s anything wrong with that.

Much more interesting, however, was Marrakesh’s Djemm el Fna. At this vibrant outdoor market, Youseff and I shared a steaming bowl of tender and delicious snails cooked in olive oil and spices.

I’ve had similar experiences time and again. Local culture seems most powerfully expressed street-side, eating where locals eat. Fancier restaurants in

foreign locales seem to cater to homogenized American-European tastes.

When I travel, I jump off the tour bus — or flee the resort — as often as possible to experience the country street-level. I prefer chowing down with locals, rather than with tourists like me.

Usually, this eat-with-the-locals strategy reveals the best food — but not always.

The food section of Frommer’s Costa Rica 2011 travel guide begins: “Costa Rican food is not especially memorable.”

“Baloney,” I thought. Every country’s food is wonderful if you avoid mainstream restaurants and take to the street. Right? Um, maybe.

At Riu Palace in Guanacaste, Costa Rica, I was delighted by a white-tablecloth dinner that could only be described as Chicago-style molecular gastronomy: cone-like tortillas filled with whipped Parmesan, foie gras cubes topped with mango gel, innovative and delicious.

My experiences at regular Costa Rican restaurants



Not your typical Costa Rican fare. | DAVID HAMMOND PHOTO

were less satisfying — bland, no spark; fresh, but flat. Regrettably, I’ve felt the same at Irazu (1865 N. Milwaukee), Chicago’s Guy Fieri-approved Costa Rican restaurant. They serve seemingly authentic but there’re limits to what can be done with beans, rice and salad.

Eating at mom-and-pop places is my strategy for discovering deliciousness. In Costa Rica, a gorgeous country with abundant fresh produce, this gambit proved less successful. I deeply respect the culinary tradition; it doubtlessly pleases millions, but it left me unmoved.

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